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ABSTRACT

This study explored teachers' reasons for teaching in Catholic secondary schools and examined why they stayed in Catholic secondary schools. Data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four teachers representing different ethnicities, religions, and genders indicated that respondents considered the environment in Catholic schools to be positive and family-like. They felt this environment was an important reason for staying in Catholic schools. They perceived that students who attended Catholic schools differed significantly from students who attended public schools. They considered themselves surrogate parents to their students and believed the teacher-student relationship was part of why they wanted to remain in Catholic schools. Peer support and rapport were important influences on their decisions to work in and remain in Catholic schools. All of the respondents had opportunities to leave for other jobs in teaching or in other professions. They cited lack of administrative support and not being treated like professionals as reasons why they would leave the Catholic secondary schools. (Contains 25 references.) (SM)

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Running Head: LEADING A LAY FACULTY: UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS

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Leading A Lay Faculty into the Twenty-first Century:

Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Why They Teach In

Catholic Secondary Schools

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association

New Orleans, LA

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how selected teachers described their Catholic secondary school teaching experiences. Two areas under investigation were: 1) the reasons for teaching in Catholic secondary school; and 2) why they stay in Catholic secondary schools. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted and three categories describing the interviewees' experiences emerged - the environment, the students and their colleagues.

Leading A Lay Faculty into the Twenty-first Century: Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Why They Teach In Catholic Secondary Schools

Introduction

The changing nature of the Catholic secondary school faculty has had a profound impact on the need to understand what factors attract and retain lay teachers. During the 1997-1998 academic year lay faculty members accounted for over 90% of the nation's secondary Catholic school teachers (Metzler, 1998). The focus for hiring and retaining has shifted from nuns, priests and brothers whose vocation was teaching in Catholic schools, to lay men and women who, given the option to teach in public schools, have chosen to teach in Catholic high schools.

Review of the Literature

The limited research in the area of quality of work life in education indicates that teacher quality of work life is positively associated with teacher engagement which leads to increased productivity and greater job satisfaction (Louis & Rosmiller, 1991). The quality of work life variables of respect, opportunities for collaborative work, opportunities to use and develop new skills, and a sense of goal congruency are critical factors for teacher engagement (Louis & Rosmiller, 1991). When opportunities for growth and development are absent, teachers are more likely to leave their jobs to find more rewarding and challenging environments (Harris, 1988).

Research with lay Catholic high school teachers confirms the role school environment plays in teachers' career decisions. When given a list of 12 reasons for teaching in Catholic high schools, lay teachers' primary reason was the educational environment (Benson & Guerra, 1985). Academic environment has been described in terms of community, shared goals, collegiality, and order and discipline (Purkey and Smith, 1983). The complexity and scope of the descriptions of

academic environment influence all areas of a teacher's worklife. Environment can effect both the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of a teacher's job.

Researching job satisfaction for Catholic school teachers, Ciriello (in Tarr, Ciriello, & Convey, 1993) found that external satisfaction for these teachers was described in terms of actions with students, and general environmental conditions. This is further supported by research which describes extrinsic rewards as including the school environment, policy input, relationship with the administration and colleagues, recognition for teaching, opportunities for advancement, classroom discipline, and salary and benefits (Convey, 1992). In terms of job satisfaction, environment plays a crucial role in a teacher's decision to remain in a school. According to Convey (1992) "the school's environment and the relationships that teachers establish with other members of the school community are the important determinants of teacher satisfaction, success, and longevity, and of student achievement" p. 121.

Ciriello (in Tarr, Ciriello, & Convey, 1993) was further able to characterizes intrinsic satisfaction for Catholic school teachers in terms of self-actualization and competency. The highest level of satisfaction for many teachers has been identified as the ability to make a difference in the lives of students (Ashton, Webb, & Doda, 1983; Bellon, Bellon, Blank, Brian, & Kershaw, 1989; Dinham, 1992; Klcker, & Loadman, 1997). This can extend into factors which enhance a teacher's sense of self-efficacy. McLaughlin (1993) found that teachers depend on their students for their professional rewards and sense of identity. Teachers who do not experience success from their efforts are more likely to leave teaching than those who have positive experiences with their students (Rosenholtz, 1984).

Positive relationships with other faculty members also contribute to teacher satisfaction (Dinham, 1994). In addition, shared attitudes, values, and beliefs of the members of the school

enhance the development of the school community (Grant, 1985). Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1981) differentiated between Catholic schools and public schools in terms of their value consistency. Research studying the value preferences of Catholic secondary school teachers found that shared values do exist among lay teachers (Lacey, 1998), and shared group values have been tied to teacher satisfaction (Salganik & Karweit, 1982). People search for work environments where they feel free to express attitudes and values (Holland, 1973). People bring to their jobs different values and expectations. When their expectations are met they stay in their position, when their expectations are not met they leave (Porter and Steers, 1973).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how selected teachers described their reasons for teaching in Catholic secondary schools, and why they stay in Catholic secondary schools. The insights gained from these teachers' personal and professional reflections may add to the knowledge base on teacher satisfaction and retention.

Methodology

Participants

The rational for this study hinged upon gaining an understanding of teachers' personal and professional insights into their career decisions. Because of the need for understanding, this study focused more on the depth of the interviews rather than the number of subjects. Since qualitative research is exploratory with the goal of generating descriptive categories, data was gathered from a range of subjects' representing various groups (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interviewees were selected from among the ethnicity, religions, and genders representative of the Catholic secondary school teaching community.

Four Catholic high school teachers participated in this study. Teacher A is a white female who has been teaching social studies for 15 years in a Catholic secondary school. She is 38 years old, single and Catholic.

Teacher B a white male, has been teaching in Catholic schools for 16 years. He is a high school English teacher who once served as a Catholic school administrator. He spent six years in public school before entering the Catholic school system. Teacher B is 46 years old and single. He is Catholic.

Teacher C a 46 year old female, has been in Catholic education for nine years. She is a mathematics teacher. Her husband is also a teacher who teachers in a non-denominational private school where she has tutored after school and during the summer. She has two grown children and is not Catholic.

Teacher D is a Hispanic male. He taught in a private school for five years and is in his fifth year in Catholic school. He is a mathematics teacher, married, 42 years old, with two children. He is Catholic.

Procedure

Qualitative data were collected for the purpose of generating categories and formulating theoretical ideas that would describe how teachers viewed their experiences in Catholic schools. Following the qualitative approach to research, each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour at the school site. The qualitative method of inquiry was selected to respond to the necessity of understanding the subject in terms of his or her frame of reference (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). Each of the participants was known to the researcher and agreed to cooperate in this study.

All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were reviewed by the interviewees for accuracy (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Over a period of one month the researcher reviewed the transcripts on three different occasions. Open coding was used to identify concepts and for grouping concepts that pertained to the same phenomena into categories (Strauss, 1987). Two outside readers reviewed the transcripts for triangulation purposes.

The interview methodology used in this study allowed the researcher time to develop an understanding of the teachers' perceptions of why they teach in Catholic secondary schools when other options are available to them.

Results

Analysis of the data led to the identification of three categories articulated by the teachers as explaining their reasons for teaching and staying in Catholic secondary schools- the environment, the students, and their colleagues.

The Environment

The environment was identified by all of the participants as positive and family like. It had a profound effect on why these teachers selected Catholic schools to teach in and why they stayed in those schools. As one teacher stated:

> -The family atmosphere lets me teach and help at the same time. There is support from the administration and from the other teachers I work with. We all have a voice and it is heard.

The teachers compared the Catholic school environment to both public schools and non-denominational private schools. Catholic schools were perceived to provide an environment where teachers could function in an atmosphere where they, were empowered to teach, controlled what went on their classrooms, and decided how grades were awarded to their students:

-I have friends who teach in private schools and the parents feel that they are paying for their children to get good grades. The administrators foster this environment by forcing teachers to award higher grades then the students earn.

This category also included the dimension of student discipline. Students were perceived to possess self-discipline and parents were seen as supportive of the teachers and schools efforts to discipline their children. As might be expected, in light of the media coverage of school violence, the teachers drew comparisons to public schools:

-You just can't teach in public schools. All you hear about is the discipline problems. I've been offered three jobs but chose to stay here because you can teach and not worry about the discipline part of the job.

Environment appears to be a key element affecting these teachers' perception of their ability to do their job. Having a voice in their school, administrative support, and safety were characteristic of how these teachers described an effective teaching and learning environment.

The Students

Teachers in the study perceived that the students who attend Catholic schools were significantly different from students who attend public schools. They saw themselves as surrogate parents to those in their charge. The student-teacher relationship played an important part in the teachers responses as to why they were in a Catholic school:

-I really enjoy the kids. I do some of my best teaching after the bell at 2:30. I am passionate about what I do. Sometimes I see myself as a parent figure for some of these kids. They need someone to trust and I see part of what I do as being there for them.

Teachers also perceived their relationship with the students as that of motivator. They felt that this was something they could do in a Catholic school that they could not do in a public school:

-I am determined to get the best from others. I want to make a difference in the lives of my students.

I can talk to them about God. I want what is best for my students.

Catholic schools let us deal with the students on all of these levels.

The culture of the Catholic schools was seen as providing an opportunity for teachers to interact with students on different levels. This was perceived as a positive experience for all of these teachers.

The Colleagues

Peer support and rapport were identified as important factors for teachers when they selected Catholic schools to teach in. It also emerged as an important reason why they continue to teach in Catholic secondary schools:

-The professional respect that is shared among the faculty members is very important to me. I enjoy the company of the other members of the faculty. Everyone shares the same ideals and goals for the students. The sense of camaraderie is always there.

Teachers relied on each other for support and friendship. Relationships between teachers were taken into the after school social realm. Teachers also felt that if they had problems either personally or professionally they could depend on one another for help and support.

-Sometime teachers go out together after school on Fridays or on weekends. It is kind of a social get together where we try not to talk about what goes on in the classroom, but of course we always end up

talking about school. Sometimes we use these conversations to solve problems, sometimes we just laugh.

Collegiality is an important factor in building school climate and culture. The teachers in this study identified and valued their colleagues for their personal and professional interactions.

Retention

All of the teachers involved in this study had opportunities to leave Catholic secondary schools to work in other school environments or to work in the business world. Lack of administrative support or not being treated like professionals were cited as reasons why these teachers would leave Catholic secondary schools.

-I would leave if I felt I was not heard or the reasons that I am here change.

-I've already turned down three job offers, unless I found a place with the atmosphere that is here, with the same relationship with the other teachers, I would just stay.

-The integrity of the administration is a big reason for being here, if that changed I would go somewhere else.

These issues do not appear to be a concern for any of these teachers at this point in their careers. However, it is noteworthy to mention the role that shared values, integrity, and collegiality played in their decisions to remain in their current positions.

Discussion

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges facing Catholic secondary school administrators is hiring good teachers who will remain in the school. The high turnover rate typical of Catholic secondary schools hurts both students and programs. Stability is as important in the lives of students as it is in the implementation of academic programs.

The decision of the teachers in this study to initially select Catholic secondary schools and ultimately remain in these schools supports the importance of creating and nurturing a school environment (Benson & Guerra, 1985; Convey, 1992). Teachers in these schools feel empowered, supported, and safe. Their articulation of factors that would cause them to leave their present position focused on changes in the environment that reflected a divergence of their personal goals and values from those of the school. This supports the role that shared goals and values play in determining school environment (Purkey & Smith, 1983, 1985; Lacey, 1998). Administrators who are aware of the values that are characteristic of, and important to, the school community can recruit and hire teachers who are more likely to remain in that environment (Lacey, 1998).

The second category identified by the teachers, as impacting their decision to teach and remain in Catholic secondary schools, was their concern for their students well being and their perceived ability to make a difference in these students' lives. This interaction with students is crucial in assuring teacher satisfaction (Ashton, Webb, & Doda, 1983; Bellon, Bellon, Blank, Brian, & Kershaw, 1988; Dinham, 1994; Klcker, & Loadman, 1997).

These teachers defined their relationships with students as multidimensional. They described themselves as teachers, as parent figures, as motivators, and as spiritual advisors. This supports Flynn's (1993) research which identified ten things that teachers would like students to take away from their classes.

> The three highest expectations hich teachers have of students ...refer to reverence or respect: Respect and concern for others; Respect and esteem for themselves; Respect and awareness of God in their lives. P. 120

Teachers' ability to define these roles, and the success they experience from being able to teach in an environment that supports positive experiences with students, is an important factor in creating job satisfaction. This feeling of success is crucial for teacher retention (Rosenholtz, 1984).

The final category identified by the teachers in this study related to their colleagues. Mutual respect and shared professionalism with their peers were cited as important factors in their decision to remain in their current position. The shared social and professional values as well as the need for affiliation and mutual respect support the research examining what teachers appreciate and value in Catholic schools (Flynn, 1993). The literature (Dinham, 1994) further supports the connection between the job satisfaction expressed by these teachers and the positive relationships they experience with their colleagues.

Administrators must be aware of the importance of encouraging and supporting the development of a school culture that fosters respect and collegiality. Providing faculty members with the opportunity for social and professional interaction may increase job satisfaction and reduce turnover.

Closing Remarks

Overall the teachers in this study were satisfied with their current positions. It is interesting to note that they saw their role as Catholic school teachers as different from the role of their public school peers. This may be related to Coleman's (1985) findings regarding the difference in value consistency in Catholic schools and public schools. It further supports the important role shared values play when teachers make employment and retention decisions (Lacey, 1998).

As Flynn (1993) points out, "Teachers value highly the friendly environment of Catholic schools and the mutual respect which exists between staff and students" p. 119. Understanding the factors that teachers perceive as causing them to select and remain in Catholic secondary schools can help administrators provide an environment that satisfies the teacher's needs. This environment in turn will encourage teachers to pursue their professional and personal goals while remaining at the same school site. This scenario provides a win-win situation for the teachers, the students, the parents, and the school.

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